RODENTZ

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Book One: The Change

Chapter One — The Morning After

Suna woke up because something was scratching her pillow.

At first, she thought it was a dream.

She kept her eyes closed and listened.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Scratch.

She rolled over.

The scratching stopped.

Suna opened one eye.

Nothing.

Her bedroom looked exactly the same as it had the night before. Posters covered the walls. Books were stacked beside her bed. Her school backpack sat half-open on the floor, one sneaker sticking out of it.

Then she felt something prick her cheek.

“Ouch.”

She reached up.

Her fingers touched something hard.

She froze.

Slowly, she pulled her hand away and looked at it.

A tiny, pale quill was caught between her fingers.

Suna stared at it.

“What…”

She touched her cheek again.

Another quill.

Then another.

Her breathing quickened.

She threw back the blankets.

For several seconds, she couldn’t understand what she was seeing.

Her arms were covered with short, stiff quills.

Not feathers.

Not hairs.

Quills.

Her hands were still human, but the skin along her arms had changed. Dark patches covered parts of her shoulders, and strange ridges ran along her back.

Suna stumbled out of bed and ran toward the mirror.

She stopped.

The girl staring back at her looked terrified.

It was still Suna.

But it wasn’t.

Her face was subtly different. Her nose was smaller and more rounded. Her ears were slightly pointed. A line of pale quills ran from the top of her head down her neck.

She turned sideways.

A mass of longer quills covered her back.

“No.”

She stepped backward.

“No, no, no.”

Her bedroom door opened.

“Suna?”

Her mother stood in the doorway.

She looked at Suna.

Then at the quills.

The color drained from her face.

Neither of them spoke.

Finally, her mother whispered:

“Oh my God.”

Suna stared at her reflection.

Outside, somewhere in the neighborhood, a siren began to wail.

Then another.

Then another.

Her phone started buzzing on the nightstand.

Once.

Twice.

Then continuously.

Messages.

News alerts.

Missed calls.

Suna picked it up with shaking hands.

The first notification read:

EMERGENCY ALERT: REPORTS OF MASS BIOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.

Another appeared.

MILLIONS OF TEENAGERS AFFECTED.

Then:

AUTHORITIES URGE CALM.

Suna looked back at the mirror.

She touched one of the quills.

It didn’t disappear.

It was part of her.

She suddenly understood why the scratching had been so loud.

She hadn’t been hearing something scratching her pillow.

She had been hearing herself.

By breakfast, the world had changed.

Every television channel showed the same images.

Teenagers being taken from houses.

Parents crying.

Ambulances filling hospital parking lots.

Schools closing.

Military vehicles moving through city streets.

And everywhere, teenagers who looked like animals.

A boy with antlers.

A girl with feathers covering her arms.

Someone with scales across their face.

A teenager with a long tail standing behind a police barricade.

The news anchors didn’t know what to call them.

Eventually, one word appeared on every screen.

HYBRIDS.

Suna sat silently at the kitchen table.

Her mother kept staring at her.

Not because she was afraid of Suna.

At least, Suna hoped she wasn’t.

She was afraid of what might happen to her.

“Can I still go to school?” Suna asked.

Her mother looked at the television.

“No.”

“But—”

“Suna.”

“I’m still me.”

“I know.”

“I’m still your daughter.”

“I know.”

“Then why can’t I go?”

Her mother didn’t answer.

On television, a government official appeared at a podium.

“We are asking families to remain calm. The phenomenon appears to affect approximately one out of every nine teenagers. Researchers are currently working to determine its cause.”

One out of nine.

Suna looked down at her hands.

One out of nine.

The number would follow her for years.

Maybe forever.

Three days later, Suna arrived at Hawthorne Academy.

It didn’t look like a school.

It looked like a fortress.

The old brick buildings were surrounded by temporary fencing. Security cameras watched every entrance. Armed guards stood near the gates.

Beyond them, hundreds of teenagers moved across the courtyard.

And every one of them was different.

A rabbit-eared boy carried books against his chest.

A girl with bright blue feathers sat beneath a tree.

A huge teenager with gray skin and the head of something resembling a rhinoceros walked beside a tiny girl with mouse ears.

Some were talking.

Some were laughing.

Some were crying.

Some simply stared at the ground.

Suna pulled her hood over her head.

She immediately regretted it.

A voice came from beside her.

“You know that doesn’t hide them.”

Suna turned.

A boy was leaning against the brick wall.

He had messy dark hair, pale skin, and a long, naked-looking tail hanging behind him.

His eyes were strangely tired.

But he was smiling.

“Hide what?” Suna asked.

He pointed toward her hood.

“The quills.”

Suna instinctively touched them.

“Oh.”

“I’m Max.”

“Suna.”

“I know.”

She frowned.

“How?”

Max smiled.

“Because everybody knows everybody here.”

He pushed away from the wall.

“Welcome to Hawthorne.”

Suna looked at the courtyard.

“Is it always like this?”

“No.”

He paused.

“It used to be a normal school.”

“What happened?”

Max looked toward the gates.

“Everything.”

Then he smiled again.

“But you’ll get used to it.”

Suna wasn’t sure she believed him.

Max started walking.

She followed.

For the first time since waking up with quills on her pillow, Suna felt something she hadn’t expected.

Not happiness.

Not yet.

Something smaller.

Something fragile.

Hope.

She looked around at the strange teenagers filling the courtyard.

For the first time, she wasn’t the strangest person in the room.

And somewhere far above the school, something moved across the sky.

A dark shape.

Silent wings.

Watching.

End of Chapter One

Chapter Two — The School of Strangers

The first thing Suna noticed about Hawthorne Academy was that nobody looked normal.

The second thing she noticed was that nobody seemed to care.

A boy with enormous moth-like wings sat on the steps reading a comic book.

Two girls with identical fox ears argued over a bag of chips.

A tall kid with blue-gray scales was trying to squeeze through a doorway that clearly hadn’t been designed for someone his size.

And everywhere Suna looked, there were tails.

Feathers.

Fur.

Claws.

Horns.

Quills.

She pulled her hood farther over her head.

Max glanced at her.

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Hiding.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“You’ve been pulling that hood over your head every thirty seconds.”

Suna frowned.

“Maybe I like my hood.”

“Maybe.”

Max smiled.

They continued across the courtyard.

Hawthorne Academy had once been an ordinary high school. Suna could still see traces of it.

The faded school colors painted on the walls.

The trophy cases.

The posters advertising last year’s football games.

The lockers.

But now the halls were crowded with students who looked like they belonged in a science-fiction movie.

Some had changed only slightly.

Others barely looked human anymore.

Suna stopped beside a classroom door.

A small boy with rabbit ears was sitting alone at a desk.

He looked terrified.

Suna recognized the expression immediately.

“What’s his name?” she asked.

Max followed her gaze.

“Eli.”

“Is he new?”

“Everybody’s new.”

Suna looked at him.

Max’s smile disappeared.

“Some of them got here yesterday. Some arrived this morning. Some have been here since the first day.”

“What happens to them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do they change more?”

Max hesitated.

“Nobody knows.”

That answer frightened Suna more than anything else.

They entered the cafeteria.

It was enormous.

Tables had been pushed together into groups. Boxes of supplies were stacked along the walls. Teachers stood near the entrances, watching the students.

There were no normal lunch lines anymore.

No announcements about football games.

No cafeteria gossip.

Just hundreds of teenagers trying to figure out what their lives had become.

Max pointed toward a table.

“That’s where we sit.”

Suna followed him.

Three people were already there.

The first was a girl with short black hair and enormous golden eyes.

She stared at Suna.

“Quills?”

Suna nodded.

The girl smiled.

“Cool.”

Suna blinked.

“Cool?”

“Yeah.”

The girl held up her hands.

Her fingers ended in small, curved claws.

“Everybody gets something.”

She looked toward Max.

“What did she get?”

“Porcupine.”

The girl grinned.

“That’s actually pretty awesome.”

Suna wasn’t sure whether to laugh.

Max sat down.

“This is Megan.”

Megan waved.

“Hi.”

The second student was a boy with dark skin and small antlers growing from his forehead.

“Jordan.”

The third was a quiet girl with silver-gray fur covering her cheeks and ears like a wolf.

“Suna,” Max said, “that’s Lena.”

Lena nodded.

Suna sat down.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke.

Then Megan pushed a carton of milk toward her.

“You want this?”

Suna shook her head.

“I’m okay.”

“You haven’t eaten.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’ve been staring at that sandwich for five minutes.”

Suna looked down.

She hadn’t realized it.

She picked it up.

“Thanks.”

Megan smiled.

“No problem.”

For the first time that morning, Suna took a bite.

It tasted normal.

That almost made her cry.

Normal food.

Normal cafeteria.

Normal teenagers.

Except nothing was normal anymore.

Suddenly, a loudspeaker crackled.

Everyone stopped talking.

A voice came over the intercom.

“All students are reminded to remain inside designated areas. The western gate is currently closed.”

A pause.

Then:

“Security teams are responding to an unauthorized entry attempt.”

The cafeteria erupted into whispers.

Max stood.

“Stay here.”

Suna grabbed his sleeve.

“What’s happening?”

“Nothing.”

“You don’t know that.”

Max looked toward the doors.

His expression had changed.

The tired smile was gone.

“Stay here.”

Then he walked away.

Suna watched him disappear into the crowd.

“What’s he doing?” she asked.

Megan leaned closer.

“Max does that.”

“Does what?”

“Acts like he knows what’s going on.”

“Does he?”

Megan shrugged.

“Sometimes.”

A sudden crash came from somewhere outside.

Everyone jumped.

Another crash.

Then a metallic bang.

The cafeteria doors opened.

A security guard rushed inside.

“Everyone stay where you are!”

A second guard appeared behind him.

His face was pale.

“Lock the doors.”

The first guard turned.

“What?”

“Now.”

The doors slammed shut.

Students began shouting.

Suna stood.

“What’s outside?”

Nobody answered.

Then she heard it.

A scratching sound.

Slow.

Heavy.

Coming from the other side of the doors.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Suna’s stomach tightened.

She knew that sound.

But this wasn’t coming from her.

Something was outside.

Something large.

The lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then went out.

The cafeteria fell silent.

A scream came from the hallway.

Then another.

Emergency lights switched on, bathing the room in red.

Suna could barely see.

Then she noticed something moving beyond the cafeteria windows.

A shadow passed across the courtyard.

Huge.

Too high off the ground to be a person.

It stopped.

Two pale eyes appeared in the darkness.

Suna froze.

The creature tilted its head.

Then it looked directly at her.

She felt every quill on her back rise.

Max suddenly appeared beside her.

“Don’t move.”

Suna whispered.

“What is that?”

Max stared through the window.

“I don’t know.”

The creature stepped into the light.

It wasn’t one of the hybrids.

It wasn’t a teenager.

It wasn’t human.

It was something else.

Something that had been watching Hawthorne from the sky.

Something with enormous black wings.

And for one terrifying second, Suna thought it smiled.

Then the creature disappeared into the darkness.

The cafeteria remained silent.

Max looked at Suna.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

He looked toward the window.

“About why that thing was looking at you.”

Suna’s heart sank.

Outside, somewhere above the school, wings beat once.

Then vanished into the night.

And Suna realized that the Change might not have happened to them by accident.

It might have happened for a reason.

Chapter Three — The Boy Who Wouldn’t Stay Down

Nobody went back to lunch.

The cafeteria had been cleared within minutes.

Teachers moved students through the halls in small groups while security guards checked every door and window. Nobody would explain what had happened.

That made Suna even more nervous.

She walked beside Max through the nearly empty hallway.

Megan followed several steps behind them.

“Where are we going?” Suna asked.

“Somewhere private.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want the entire school hearing this conversation.”

Suna stopped.

“Then maybe you should tell me what the conversation is about.”

Max stopped too.

For a moment, he simply stared at her.

Then he sighed.

“Okay.”

Megan caught up with them.

“Finally.”

Max gave her an annoyed look.

“You could’ve waited.”

“I’ve been waiting all day.”

Suna looked between them.

“You two knew something was going to happen?”

“No,” Max said.

“Not exactly,” Megan said at the same time.

Max turned toward her.

“Megan.”

“What?”

“You said you didn’t know.”

“I said I didn’t know it would happen here.”

Suna’s stomach tightened.

“Would someone please explain?”

Max looked around.

The hallway was empty.

He lowered his voice.

“That thing outside wasn’t the first strange thing we’ve seen.”

Suna felt cold.

“What else?”

“Animals.”

“Animals?”

“Not normal ones.”

Megan folded her arms.

“Birds that don’t behave like birds. Things moving around the school at night. Shadows on the roof.”

Max continued.

“Three nights ago, one of the security cameras caught something flying over the gym.”

“Like a bird?”

“No.”

“Like the thing today?”

“We don’t know.”

Suna remembered the pale eyes behind the glass.

“What did it want?”

Max shook his head.

“That’s the problem.”

He opened a door.

Inside was a small classroom that had been converted into an office.

Maps covered the walls.

There were photographs everywhere.

Suna stepped inside.

Some showed the school.

Others showed city streets.

One showed a hospital.

Another showed a government building surrounded by police cars.

Max closed the door.

“Welcome to the part of Hawthorne you’re not supposed to know about.”

Suna looked at the photographs.

“Why do you have all this?”

“Because somebody needs to figure out what’s happening.”

Megan leaned against a desk.

“Max thinks he’s Batman.”

“I’m trying to keep people alive.”

“Same thing.”

Max ignored her.

Suna picked up one of the photographs.

It showed a rooftop.

Something dark was visible in the distance.

She couldn’t make out what it was.

“Is that…”

“Yeah.”

“The thing from today?”

“Maybe.”

Suna put the photograph down.

“Why haven’t you told the teachers?”

“We did.”

“And?”

“They told us to stop investigating.”

“Why?”

Max’s expression hardened.

“Because they don’t want students asking questions.”

Suna looked at him.

“Who doesn’t?”

Before Max could answer, the door opened.

A boy stood there.

Suna recognized him from the cafeteria.

The blue-gray-scaled student.

He was enormous.

His shoulders nearly filled the doorway.

“Max.”

Max turned.

“What?”

“You need to come outside.”

“Why?”

The boy looked at Suna.

Then Megan.

Then back at Max.

“There’s been another sighting.”

Max’s face changed.

“Where?”

“Gym roof.”

Megan straightened.

“How close?”

“Close enough.”

Max grabbed his jacket.

Suna stood.

“I’m coming.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you just got here.”

“And?”

“And I don’t know what that thing is.”

Suna folded her arms.

“You don’t get to decide whether I’m scared.”

Max stared at her.

Then smiled slightly.

“Okay.”

Megan laughed.

“What?”

“You really don’t know Max yet.”

“Apparently not.”

Max opened the door.

“Stay behind me.”

They climbed the stairs toward the gym.

The farther they went, the quieter the school became.

Suna could hear every footstep.

Every breath.

Every tiny movement.

Her senses had been getting stronger since the Change.

Sometimes it was useful.

Sometimes it was overwhelming.

At the top of the stairs, Max stopped.

He held up one hand.

Everyone froze.

Suna listened.

Nothing.

Then—

Tap.

Something landed on the roof above them.

Tap.

Tap.

The blue-gray-scaled boy whispered.

“It’s here.”

Max slowly pushed open the rooftop door.

Cold air rushed inside.

The roof was empty.

Suna stepped outside.

The sky was gray.

Clouds moved quickly overhead.

“Where is it?” she whispered.

Max pointed.

Across the roof was a ventilation tower.

Something was behind it.

A shadow.

Then it moved.

Suna’s quills rose.

The creature stepped into view.

It was larger than she had imagined.

Its body was covered in dark feathers, but it stood upright.

Its wings folded against its back.

Its face was strangely human.

Too human.

It looked at them.

Nobody moved.

Then it spoke.

“Max.”

Suna’s blood ran cold.

Max stepped forward.

“You know me?”

The creature tilted its head.

“I know all of you.”

Megan stepped forward.

“Who are you?”

The creature smiled.

“You’ve been asking the wrong question.”

“What question should we ask?”

The creature spread its wings.

“Why.”

A gust of wind swept across the roof.

Suna shielded her face.

When she looked again, the creature was gone.

Megan stared into the sky.

“Did that just happen?”

The scaled boy nodded.

“Yep.”

Max walked to the edge of the roof.

Suna followed.

There was nothing below.

No footprints.

No feathers.

Nothing.

Then Suna noticed something lying near the ventilation tower.

A small metallic object.

She picked it up.

It was about the size of a coin.

A strange symbol was engraved on its surface.

Three circles connected by lines.

Max stared at it.

“Where did you find that?”

“Right there.”

He took it from her.

His expression became serious.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Megan stepped closer.

“I do.”

Max looked at her.

“Where have you seen it?”

Megan didn’t answer immediately.

She looked toward the city.

Then she said quietly:

“On the government vans.”

Suna felt a chill.

“What government vans?”

“The ones taking hybrid kids away.”

Max’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re sure?”

Megan nodded.

“I’ve seen that symbol before.”

Suna looked at the strange device in Max’s hand.

“What does that mean?”

Megan looked at her.

“It means someone has been watching us.”

A distant siren began to rise from the city below.

Max closed his hand around the device.

“We need to find out who.”

Megan smiled faintly.

“Now you’re finally asking the right question.”

Far above them, hidden among the clouds, something watched Hawthorne Academy.

And somewhere inside a government laboratory, a computer screen displayed a photograph of Suna.

Beside it were thousands of other photographs.

Each one showed a transformed teenager.

At the top of the screen was a single heading:

PROJECT NINE

Below it, another line appeared.

SUBJECT 009-417 — SUNA VALE

HYBRID TYPE: RODENT

STATUS: ACTIVE

The screen flickered.

Then a final message appeared.

OBSERVATION PHASE COMPLETE.

BEGIN PHASE TWO.

Chapter Four — Project Nine

Suna didn’t sleep that night.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the creature on the roof.

Its black wings.

Its strange, almost-human face.

The way it had said Max’s name.

But worse than that was the photograph.

Her photograph.

She had never seen it before.

Yet someone had been watching her.

Suna sat on the edge of her bed in the room she’d been assigned at Hawthorne Academy, staring at the city through the window.

The school was supposed to be safe.

That was what everyone kept saying.

Safe from angry crowds.

Safe from the government.

Safe from people who thought hybrids were dangerous.

But if somebody had been watching them inside the school, what did safe actually mean?

A soft knock came at the door.

Suna turned.

“Come in.”

Max opened the door.

He was carrying two paper cups.

“I brought hot chocolate.”

Suna stared at him.

“At midnight?”

“It’s not technically midnight.”

She checked the clock.

12:47.

“That’s midnight.”

“Close enough.”

He handed her one of the cups.

She took it.

“Thanks.”

Max sat in the chair beside the window.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Finally, Suna said, “What is Project Nine?”

Max’s expression changed.

“How do you know about that?”

“I heard you talking to Megan.”

“I didn’t tell you.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Max looked down.

“Project Nine is something I’ve been trying to investigate.”

“Why?”

“Because of the number.”

“What number?”

“Nine.”

Suna remembered the news reports.

One out of nine teenagers.

She felt a chill.

“You think that’s connected?”

“I think everything is connected.”

Suna stared at him.

“That’s not an answer.”

“No.”

Max leaned back.

“It’s a problem.”

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

He opened it.

It was a map of the city.

Several locations had been circled.

Hospitals.

Research centers.

Government buildings.

And Hawthorne Academy.

Suna pointed to one of the circles.

“What’s that?”

“St. Mary’s Hospital.”

“What about it?”

“That’s where the first local hybrids were taken.”

“Why?”

“Doctors thought they were sick.”

Suna frowned.

“They weren’t.”

“No.”

Max pointed to another location.

“Northstar Research.”

Suna recognized the name.

“I’ve heard of them.”

“They specialize in genetics.”

“Do they study hybrids?”

“Officially, no.”

“And unofficially?”

Max looked at her.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

The door suddenly opened.

Megan stood there.

“You two are terrible at keeping secrets.”

Max sighed.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

She entered and closed the door.

Suna noticed something different about her.

Megan wasn’t smiling.

“What’s wrong?”

Megan looked at Max.

“Someone’s coming.”

“Who?”

“The Elders.”

Max stood.

“Already?”

Megan nodded.

“They arrived downtown an hour ago.”

Suna looked between them.

“Who are the Elders?”

Neither answered.

“Megan?”

“They’re hybrids.”

Suna blinked.

“Older ones?”

“Much older.”

“But the Change just happened.”

Megan nodded.

“That’s what everyone thinks.”

Suna felt the room grow colder.

“What do you mean?”

Megan crossed her arms.

“There are people who changed before yesterday.”

Suna stared at her.

“That’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

Max looked toward the window.

“The Elders appeared about three weeks before the Change.”

Suna stood.

“Three weeks?”

“They weren’t public at first.”

“How did you find out?”

“They contacted my family.”

Suna looked at him.

“Why?”

Max hesitated.

“Because my family has money.”

“That’s it?”

“No.”

He looked uncomfortable.

“They wanted funding.”

“For what?”

“Research.”

Suna’s stomach tightened.

“What kind of research?”

Max didn’t answer.

Megan did.

“The kind that makes you wonder whether the Change was really the beginning.”

Nobody spoke.

Then something struck the window.

Suna jumped.

A small metallic disk bounced off the glass and landed on the floor.

Max picked it up.

The same symbol was engraved on it.

Three circles.

Three lines.

The Project Nine symbol.

Megan’s face went pale.

“They found us.”

“Who?”

Before Megan could answer, the school’s emergency alarm began screaming.

Red lights flashed through the hallway.

A voice came over the intercom.

“All students remain in assigned rooms.”

Another alarm sounded.

Then the intercom went dead.

Max looked at the door.

“That’s not a drill.”

Suna heard footsteps outside.

Lots of them.

Then a loud mechanical sound.

Something heavy was moving through the hallway.

Megan stepped toward the door.

Max grabbed her arm.

“Wait.”

“I need to see.”

“No.”

The footsteps stopped.

Silence.

Then the door opened.

Three figures stood in the hallway.

They wore dark armored suits.

The suits weren’t bulky like military armor.

They moved like clothing.

Thin layers of metallic material covered their bodies, shifting and glowing faintly as they moved.

The person in front removed his helmet.

He was an older man.

His eyes were unusually bright.

Small silver feathers covered the sides of his face.

Suna stared.

He looked like a bird.

But unlike the teenagers at Hawthorne, he didn’t look frightened.

He looked prepared.

His gaze settled on Suna.

“Subject 009-417.”

Suna froze.

Max stepped in front of her.

“Don’t call her that.”

The Elder looked at him.

“Maxwell.”

Max’s expression hardened.

“You know my name.”

“We know everyone’s names.”

Megan stepped forward.

“What do you want?”

The Elder looked at her.

“You.”

Megan smiled coldly.

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“You’ve been interfering with our operations.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve attacked two transport vehicles.”

Megan’s smile disappeared.

“Those vehicles were taking kids.”

“They were being relocated.”

“Without their families.”

“They were being protected.”

“From what?”

The Elder’s eyes moved toward Suna.

“From themselves.”

Suna stepped around Max.

“What does that mean?”

The Elder studied her.

“You haven’t experienced the second stage yet.”

Suna’s heart stopped.

“Second stage?”

Max turned toward her.

“What is he talking about?”

The Elder didn’t answer.

Instead, his suit began to change.

Metallic plates unfolded across his arms.

His eyes glowed.

The other two Elders stepped forward.

Max whispered:

“Everyone get back.”

Suna looked at him.

“What are you going to do?”

Max smiled.

For the first time, Suna noticed something strange about him.

His pupils had changed.

His expression looked almost calm.

Too calm.

“Survive.”

The Elder raised one hand.

A pulse of light blasted through the hallway.

Max jumped in front of Suna.

The force threw him backward.

He slammed into a locker.

Suna screamed.

“MAX!”

He didn’t move.

Megan’s wings suddenly unfolded.

Suna stared.

She hadn’t realized Megan had wings that large.

Megan launched herself down the hallway.

The Elder raised his arm.

A glowing net shot outward.

Megan twisted in midair and narrowly avoided it.

Students began pouring from nearby rooms.

Teachers shouted for everyone to get back.

The hallway erupted into chaos.

Suna looked at Max.

He was still on the floor.

She ran toward him.

“Max!”

He opened one eye.

“Ow.”

Suna almost laughed from relief.

“You scared me!”

“Sorry.”

“Can you move?”

He sat up.

“I think so.”

Suna helped him stand.

Then something slammed into the wall beside them.

The Elder was approaching.

Max looked at Suna.

“Run.”

Suna didn’t move.

Her quills were rising.

Every instinct inside her screamed to escape.

But something else was growing stronger.

Anger.

She wasn’t a subject.

She wasn’t a number.

She wasn’t a monster.

And she wasn’t going to let somebody decide what happened to her.

Suna turned toward the Elder.

Her hands trembled.

But she stayed where she was.

The Elder stopped.

For the first time, he looked surprised.

“Interesting.”

Suna stared at him.

“What?”

He smiled.

“Your defensive response has already begun.”

Suna felt a strange pressure along her back.

Then one of her quills moved.

Not because she moved.

Because she wanted it to.

The quill lifted slightly.

The Elder’s smile vanished.

“Impossible.”

Suna looked over her shoulder.

Then back at him.

“What did I just do?”

The Elder took a step backward.

“You shouldn’t be developing abilities this quickly.”

Max stared at Suna.

Megan landed beside them.

She looked at the quill floating above Suna’s shoulder.

Then at Suna.

“Looks like you’re changing again.”

Suna swallowed.

“Is that bad?”

Megan looked toward the approaching Elders.

“Ask them.”

The building shook.

Somewhere below them, an explosion sent smoke rolling through the halls.

And for the first time since arriving at Hawthorne Academy, Suna understood something terrifying.

The Change wasn’t finished.

It had only just begun.

Chapter Five — The Second Stage

The hallway smelled like smoke.

Students crowded against the walls while teachers tried to move everyone toward the emergency stairwells.

Some were crying.

Others were staring at Suna.

She barely noticed.

She was still looking at the quill hovering beside her shoulder.

It trembled in the air.

Then dropped harmlessly onto the floor.

Suna stared at it.

“I didn’t touch it.”

Max looked at her.

“I know.”

“How did I do that?”

“I don’t know.”

Megan stepped closer.

“Neither does he.”

Max glanced at her.

“Thanks.”

“I’m just saying.”

The Elders were gone.

They had retreated after the explosion, leaving the hallway filled with smoke and confusion.

Suna looked toward the stairwell.

“Where did they go?”

“Probably regrouping,” Max said.

“Then we should leave.”

“We can’t.”

“Why?”

Max pointed toward the windows.

Suna looked outside.

Black vehicles surrounded the school.

Their doors were open.

Figures in dark uniforms stood around the perimeter.

The school was surrounded.

Megan’s expression hardened.

“They’re not here to arrest anyone.”

Suna swallowed.

“Then why are they here?”

A voice came from behind them.

“Because they want the hybrids.”

Everyone turned.

The blue-gray-scaled boy from earlier stood in the hallway.

His name was Jordan.

He was carrying two backpacks.

“Where did you get those?” Max asked.

“Storage room.”

Jordan tossed one to Max.

“Food, water, flashlights.”

Max caught it.

“Good thinking.”

Jordan looked at Suna.

“What’s happening to her?”

Suna frowned.

“What do you mean?”

He pointed toward her shoulder.

“The quill.”

Suna looked down.

The quill was moving again.

Only slightly.

She concentrated.

It rose.

A few inches.

Everyone nearby stared.

Suna’s face became hot.

“Stop looking at me.”

The quill dropped.

Megan smiled.

“That’s going to take some practice.”

“I don’t want practice.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t ask for this.”

Megan’s smile disappeared.

“I know.”

For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

Then Megan said quietly:

“None of us did.”

A loudspeaker crackled.

This time, the voice was different.

Calm.

Male.

“Students of Hawthorne Academy, remain inside the building.”

Max looked toward the ceiling.

The voice continued.

“We are here to protect you.”

Megan laughed.

“That’s funny.”

Suna looked at her.

“What’s funny?”

“They always say that.”

“Who?”

“The people who come to take you away.”

The voice continued.

“You have nothing to fear.”

Megan’s expression became cold.

“That’s exactly what they said to my brother.”

Suna looked at her.

“You have a brother?”

Megan didn’t answer.

Max did.

“He was taken three days ago.”

Suna’s stomach tightened.

“By the government?”

Megan nodded.

“They said he needed medical treatment.”

“Did he?”

“No.”

“What happened?”

“They wouldn’t tell me.”

Megan looked toward the windows.

“That’s when I started investigating.”

Suna finally understood why Megan hated the Elders.

This wasn’t just an argument about politics.

It was personal.

A sudden pounding came from the front doors.

Everyone jumped.

Another bang.

Then another.

The doors shook.

Max opened his backpack.

“Okay.”

He looked at the other students.

“We need to get everyone underground.”

Jordan frowned.

“Underground?”

“There are old maintenance tunnels beneath the school.”

Suna stared at him.

“How do you know that?”

Max smiled.

“My family bought the building.”

“Of course they did.”

Megan laughed.

“Rich people.”

“Very useful rich people.”

Another impact shook the doors.

Students began moving.

Teachers guided them toward the basement.

Suna stayed near Max.

“You knew there were tunnels?”

“Yes.”

“And you never told anyone?”

“I didn’t know if they were safe.”

“Are they?”

Max paused.

“No.”

Suna stared at him.

“Great.”

They descended two flights of stairs.

The basement was dark and dusty.

Old pipes ran across the ceiling.

Boxes were stacked along the walls.

Max led them through a narrow passage until they reached a large underground room.

It looked like an old shelter.

There were tables.

Emergency lights.

Water containers.

Even several beds.

Suna stared.

“You built this.”

Max shrugged.

“My parents did.”

“Why?”

He looked away.

“They were worried something like this would happen.”

Suna stopped.

“Before the Change?”

Max nodded.

“Before the Change.”

That sentence silenced everyone.

Megan stepped forward.

“What did they know?”

Max didn’t answer.

“Max.”

“I don’t know.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

Megan grabbed his jacket.

“Your parents knew about Project Nine.”

Max pulled away.

“I said I don’t know.”

Suna looked between them.

“What’s Project Nine?”

Nobody answered.

Then Jordan spoke.

“The nine.”

Everyone turned toward him.

He continued.

“One out of nine.”

Suna’s heart began pounding.

“What about it?”

Jordan pointed toward the wall.

Someone had written numbers across an old chalkboard.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

Underneath them were dozens of names.

Some had been crossed out.

Others had symbols beside them.

Suna stepped closer.

“Who wrote this?”

Max looked uncomfortable.

“Me.”

“Why?”

“Because I noticed something.”

“What?”

Max pointed at the names.

“Every hybrid we’ve met has a designation.”

Suna felt cold.

“Like mine.”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

Max looked at the board.

“Eight hundred and ninety-two that we know about.”

Suna stared.

“And there are more?”

“Thousands.”

Megan walked toward the board.

“Then why call it Project Nine?”

Max looked at her.

“Because the first records refer to nine original subjects.”

Suna’s heart skipped.

“Nine?”

Max nodded.

“Nine teenagers.”

“Who were they?”

“We don’t know.”

Megan looked at him.

“That’s not true.”

Max’s eyes narrowed.

“What do you know?”

“I know one of them was taken to Northstar Research.”

Suna looked at Megan.

“How do you know that?”

“My brother found the records.”

“Before he was taken?”

“Yes.”

Megan reached into her jacket.

She pulled out a small photograph.

Nine teenagers stood together in front of a laboratory.

They looked frightened.

But they were clearly transformed.

A boy with antlers.

A girl covered in feathers.

Someone with scales.

Someone with enormous ears.

And several others.

Suna took the photograph.

On the back, someone had written:

THE FIRST NINE — 17 DAYS BEFORE THE CHANGE

Suna stared at the words.

“Seventeen days.”

Max nodded.

“The Elders appeared seventeen days before everyone else.”

“And nobody noticed?”

“They disappeared.”

Megan pointed to the photograph.

“Most people never knew they existed.”

Suna looked at the nine faces.

One of them seemed familiar.

She couldn’t explain why.

Then she noticed something.

A girl standing in the back.

Short dark hair.

Golden eyes.

Small black wings.

Suna slowly looked up.

Megan was staring at the photograph.

“You recognize her,” Suna whispered.

Megan didn’t answer.

“Who is she?”

Megan took the photograph back.

“My brother.”

Suna froze.

“Your brother is a girl?”

Megan shook her head.

“No.”

She turned the photograph around.

The person Suna had noticed wasn’t Megan’s brother.

It was someone standing beside him.

A girl with enormous black wings.

Megan’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“That’s me.”

Suna stared.

“But…”

“I wasn’t supposed to remember.”

The lights suddenly went out.

Everyone froze.

Then a sound came from somewhere deep beneath the floor.

Three slow knocks.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Max whispered:

“That’s impossible.”

Suna looked at him.

“What?”

He pointed toward the floor.

“The tunnels don’t go any farther.”

Another three knocks echoed through the darkness.

Then came a voice.

Faint.

Muffled.

But unmistakably human.

“Help.”

Suna’s quills rose.

Everyone looked at her.

She looked back.

The voice came again.

“Please…”

Megan stepped toward the sound.

Max grabbed her arm.

“Don’t.”

She pulled away.

“What if it’s one of the students?”

“What if it isn’t?”

Suna stared at the floor.

Something was down there.

Something hidden beneath Hawthorne Academy.

Something that had been waiting.

She took a step forward.

A single quill lifted from her back.

This time, she didn’t make it move.

It moved on its own.

And pointed toward the darkness.

Suna whispered:

“There’s something underneath us.”

Nobody spoke.

Then the floor shook.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

Somewhere below them, a door unlocked.

And slowly—

Very slowly—

Something began climbing the stairs.

Chapter Six — Beneath Hawthorne

Nobody moved.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs was almost too quiet to hear.

Step.

Pause.

Step.

Pause.

Suna stood beside Max, staring into the darkness.

Her quills were still raised.

“Everyone stay back,” Max whispered.

Jordan moved in front of the younger students.

Megan unfolded her wings.

The teachers tried to keep everyone together, but fear was spreading through the shelter.

“What is that?” someone whispered.

Nobody answered.

The footsteps stopped.

Silence.

Then a hand appeared around the corner.

Suna held her breath.

The hand was small.

Human.

A figure slowly stepped into the emergency light.

It was a girl.

She looked about fifteen.

Her clothes were torn and covered in dust.

She had pale skin, dark hair, and strange silver markings running along her arms.

But she wasn’t attacking anyone.

She was barely standing.

Max rushed forward.

“Are you okay?”

The girl looked at him.

Her eyes widened.

“Max?”

He stopped.

“You know me?”

She nodded weakly.

“Your father…”

Max’s expression changed.

“What about my father?”

The girl looked behind her.

“They’re coming.”

Megan stepped forward.

“Who?”

The girl swallowed.

“The Elders.”

Max looked toward the stairs.

“How did you get down here?”

“I’ve been here for days.”

Suna stared.

“Days?”

The girl nodded.

“They brought me through the tunnels.”

“Who brought you?”

She looked at Megan.

“Your brother.”

Megan froze.

“My brother is alive?”

The girl nodded.

“He’s alive.”

Megan’s wings opened completely.

“Where?”

The girl pointed down the stairs.

“Northstar.”

Megan started toward the tunnel.

Max grabbed her arm.

“Wait.”

She turned.

“My brother is alive.”

“I heard her.”

“Then let me go.”

“We don’t know if it’s a trap.”

The girl’s voice trembled.

“It’s not.”

Everyone looked at her.

She took a breath.

“My name is Ava.”

Suna stepped closer.

“I’m Suna.”

Ava looked at her quills.

“I know.”

Suna frowned.

“How?”

Ava looked away.

“Because I’ve seen your file.”

The room went silent.

“My file?”

Ava nodded.

“The government has files on all of you.”

Max’s jaw tightened.

“What do they know?”

“Everything.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Your families. Your schools. Your medical records.”

Ava looked at Suna.

“Your DNA.”

Suna felt sick.

“Why?”

Ava hesitated.

“Because they knew this was going to happen.”

A murmur moved through the shelter.

Max shook his head.

“No.”

Ava looked at him.

“Your father knew.”

Max stepped backward.

“What did you say?”

“Your father knew about the Change.”

“Don’t.”

“He helped build the program.”

“Stop.”

“He helped create the first nine.”

Max’s face went pale.

Megan stared at him.

“Is it true?”

Max couldn’t answer.

The shelter suddenly shook.

A loud metallic boom came from above.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

Ava looked toward the stairs.

“They found us.”

Max turned to the teachers.

“Get everyone into the tunnels.”

One teacher shook her head.

“What about you?”

“We’ll slow them down.”

Suna stared at Max.

“You can’t fight them.”

He looked at her.

“Neither can you.”

“Then why are you staying?”

Max smiled.

“Because somebody has to.”

Megan stepped beside him.

“I’m staying.”

Jordan joined them.

“Me too.”

Suna looked at the three of them.

Then at Ava.

Then toward the frightened students.

She wanted to run.

She wanted to hide.

But she remembered what the Elder had called her.

Subject.

Number.

Rodent.

She looked at Max.

“I’m staying.”

Max shook his head.

“Suna—”

“I’m staying.”

Her voice was steadier this time.

Megan smiled.

“Welcome to the club.”

The first explosion came from above.

The shelter doors shook.

Students screamed.

Max pointed toward the tunnel.

“Move!”

The younger students began running.

Teachers followed.

Jordan helped carry the injured.

Megan stayed near the entrance.

Suna stood beside her.

“Are you scared?”

Megan glanced at her.

“Terrified.”

Suna smiled nervously.

“Good.”

Megan laughed.

“Why?”

“Because I thought I was the only one.”

Another explosion.

The shelter door buckled.

Max shouted:

“Get down!”

The door burst inward.

Smoke poured into the room.

Three Elders stepped through.

Their nanotechnology armor glowed in the darkness.

The leader removed his helmet.

He looked directly at Suna.

“Subject 009-417.”

Suna stepped forward.

“My name is Suna.”

The Elder smiled.

“Names are temporary.”

Suna’s quills rose.

“Not anymore.”

The Elder raised his hand.

A pulse of energy shot toward her.

Suna threw up her arms.

Something strange happened.

Her quills exploded outward.

Not violently.

They formed a shield.

The energy struck the quills and scattered across the room.

Everyone stared.

Suna stared too.

“I did that.”

Max smiled.

“Yes.”

The Elder looked genuinely surprised.

“Her defensive mutation has accelerated.”

Megan shouted:

“Run!”

The battle began.

Max charged first.

The Elder struck him aside, but Max rolled across the floor and stood again.

Jordan slammed into another armored figure.

Megan launched herself into the air.

Suna ducked as an energy blast passed over her.

She reached for one of her quills.

It lifted.

She focused.

The quill shot forward and struck the floor directly in front of an Elder.

The Elder stopped.

Suna stared.

“Okay.”

She smiled.

“That’s new.”

Max shouted:

“Less celebrating!”

Suna ducked.

Another blast hit the wall.

The shelter began collapsing around them.

“Everybody out!” Max yelled.

Suna grabbed Ava’s hand.

“Come on!”

They ran into the tunnels.

Behind them, the Elders continued advancing.

The tunnel was narrow and dark.

Students rushed ahead.

Suna could hear footsteps behind them.

Then Ava stopped.

Suna turned.

“What?”

Ava was staring at a metal door.

It had the same symbol.

Three circles connected by lines.

Project Nine.

Ava whispered:

“This is it.”

“What?”

“The laboratory.”

Max reached them.

He stared at the door.

“Northstar.”

Megan appeared behind him.

She looked at the symbol.

“Then my brother is here.”

Max looked at the others.

“We go in.”

Suna stared at the door.

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

Max reached for the handle.

“But we’re already here.”

The door opened.

Cold white light filled the tunnel.

Beyond it was an enormous underground laboratory.

Glass rooms stretched into the darkness.

Machines hummed.

Screens covered the walls.

And inside the first glass chamber was a teenage boy.

Megan stopped breathing.

Her wings dropped.

“Alex.”

The boy slowly lifted his head.

His eyes opened.

He looked directly at her.

“Megan?”

She ran toward the glass.

Alex pressed his hand against it.

Megan pressed hers against the other side.

“I knew you’d find me.”

Suna looked around the laboratory.

There were dozens of chambers.

Most were empty.

Some contained strange equipment.

And at the far end of the laboratory stood a massive machine.

A screen above it displayed a countdown.

PROJECT NINE — PHASE TWO

ACTIVATION IN: 06:00:00

Suna stared.

“What happens in six hours?”

Max looked at the machine.

“I don’t know.”

Ava’s face went pale.

“I do.”

Everyone turned.

She whispered:

“They’re going to activate the Change.”

Suna’s heart sank.

“But the Change already happened.”

Ava shook her head.

“No.”

She pointed toward the machine.

“This is the second one.”

The countdown continued.

05:59:47

05:59:46

And somewhere above them, the city slept.

Unaware that the next stage of the Change had already begun.

Chapter Seven — The First Nine

The countdown continued.

05:59:12

05:59:11

05:59:10

Nobody spoke.

Megan kept her hand against the glass chamber.

Alex looked exhausted, but he was smiling.

“You came,” he said.

“I told you I would.”

“You took your time.”

Megan laughed despite herself.

Then she looked at the machines around him.

“What did they do to you?”

Alex’s smile disappeared.

“Nothing I can’t explain.”

“Try.”

Alex glanced toward the laboratory doors.

“They’re listening.”

Max looked at the ceiling.

“Can you hear us?”

Alex nodded.

“Every room has microphones.”

Suna stepped closer.

“Who are they?”

Alex looked at her.

“You’re Suna.”

She froze.

“How do you know my name?”

“I’ve seen your file.”

Suna’s stomach tightened.

Alex continued.

“They’ve been watching you since the morning you changed.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re different.”

Max frowned.

“Different how?”

Alex pointed toward Suna’s back.

“Your mutation is developing faster than anyone else’s.”

Suna looked down.

One of her quills slowly lifted.

She forced it back down.

“I don’t want it.”

Alex shook his head.

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“I know.”

He looked at her through the glass.

“But wanting to be normal doesn’t make you normal anymore.”

Suna didn’t answer.

She hated that he was right.

Max moved toward the control panel beside Alex’s chamber.

“Can we open it?”

Alex laughed.

“You might want to think about that.”

“Why?”

“Because the glass isn’t holding me in.”

Max stopped.

“What?”

Alex stepped backward.

“I’m holding the door closed.”

A low mechanical hum began.

The laboratory lights flickered.

Alex’s expression changed.

“They know we’re here.”

Megan looked toward the entrance.

“How long?”

Alex glanced at the countdown.

“Not long.”

Max started typing on the control panel.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to stop the countdown.”

“Don’t.”

Max looked at him.

“Why?”

“Because that’s not the real countdown.”

Max stopped.

Alex pointed toward another screen.

“That’s a decoy.”

Suna looked at the screen.

The timer continued.

05:57:03

“Then where’s the real one?”

Alex pointed toward the ceiling.

“Every chamber has its own.”

Suna looked up.

Small lights were blinking above the glass rooms.

One.

Two.

Three.

Dozens.

Ava whispered:

“There are more than nine.”

Alex nodded.

“Thousands.”

Suna felt sick.

“What are they planning?”

Alex looked at her.

“To finish what they started.”

Megan stepped closer.

“What exactly did they start?”

Alex hesitated.

“The first nine weren’t accidents.”

Max stared at him.

“You said they created them.”

“They didn’t create us.”

Alex shook his head.

“They found us.”

“Where?”

“Different places. Different families. Different cities.”

He looked down.

“But all nine of us had something in common.”

Suna waited.

“What?”

Alex’s voice became quiet.

“We were already changing.”

Max frowned.

“Before the Change?”

“Yes.”

Suna stared at him.

“Then why didn’t anybody notice?”

“Because it happened slowly.”

Alex pointed to his arm.

“Small changes at first. Better hearing. Strange dreams. Changes in temperature. Faster healing.”

Suna remembered the morning she had woken up.

The scratching.

The strange sensations.

She remembered something else.

The night before the Change, she had dreamed about flying.

She hadn’t thought anything of it.

Until now.

Alex continued.

“Northstar found us.”

Megan’s expression hardened.

“And they experimented on you.”

“They studied us.”

“That’s what they called it.”

Alex looked away.

“They wanted to understand what was happening.”

“And did they?”

“Eventually.”

Max stepped closer.

“What did they discover?”

Alex looked directly at him.

“The Change isn’t a disease.”

Nobody moved.

“It’s a genetic activation.”

Suna frowned.

“What does that mean?”

“It means the ability was already inside us.”

Ava whispered:

“Waiting.”

Alex nodded.

“Something triggered it.”

Max looked toward the machine.

“The one-in-nine ratio.”

“Exactly.”

Suna stared at the screens.

“Why one in nine?”

Alex shook his head.

“We don’t know.”

“Then how do they?”

“They don’t.”

A sudden alarm sounded.

Everyone jumped.

The laboratory doors began closing.

Max ran toward them.

“Move!”

Jordan shoved several students through the doorway.

Megan stayed behind.

“I’ve got Alex.”

She looked at the control panel.

“How do we open the chamber?”

Alex shouted:

“Red switch!”

Megan found it.

She pulled it.

Nothing happened.

“Again!”

She pulled harder.

The glass chamber began filling with mist.

Alex coughed.

Megan panicked.

“Alex!”

Max reached the panel.

“There’s a security lock.”

“Can you break it?”

“I can try.”

The countdown changed.

05:00:00

Everyone stopped.

Five hours.

The lights turned red.

A computerized voice filled the laboratory.

“PHASE TWO COMMENCING.”

Suna’s quills rose.

“What does that mean?”

Alex looked at her.

“It means we’re out of time.”

A deep vibration shook the floor.

Then something appeared on the largest screen.

A map of the United States.

Thousands of small dots covered it.

Suna stared.

Every dot represented a hybrid.

Then another layer appeared.

Red circles surrounded cities.

Max whispered:

“What’s that?”

Alex’s face went pale.

“Activation zones.”

Megan looked at the map.

“How many?”

Alex counted silently.

“Too many.”

The computer spoke again.

“SECONDARY ACTIVATION NETWORK ONLINE.”

Suna stepped backward.

“What happens to everyone inside those zones?”

Alex looked at her.

“We don’t know.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“I know.”

Suna looked at the machine.

Her fear began turning into anger.

“They can’t do this.”

Max nodded.

“Then we stop them.”

Megan looked at him.

“For once, we agree.”

A loud metallic crash came from the laboratory entrance.

The Elders had arrived.

Three armored figures stepped through the smoke.

Behind them stood the same feathered Elder who had confronted Suna.

He looked at the teenagers.

Then at Alex.

“You shouldn’t have escaped.”

Megan stepped forward.

“You shouldn’t have taken him.”

The Elder’s expression remained calm.

“We’re trying to protect you.”

Megan’s wings spread.

“No.”

She looked around the laboratory.

“You’re trying to control us.”

The Elder looked at Suna.

“And you still don’t understand.”

Suna stepped forward.

“Then explain it.”

The Elder paused.

“The first nine were only the beginning.”

He gestured toward the screens.

“You think the Change created hybrids.”

He shook his head.

“The Change revealed them.”

Suna’s heart pounded.

“What are we?”

The Elder’s eyes settled on her.

“That’s what Project Nine was designed to discover.”

The laboratory shook again.

Glass cracked somewhere behind them.

The Elder raised his hand.

“Come with us, Suna.”

She shook her head.

“No.”

“You don’t know what you are.”

“Neither do you.”

For the first time, the Elder looked angry.

Suna felt something moving beneath her skin.

Her quills began rising.

One by one.

Max stepped beside her.

Megan stepped beside Max.

Jordan joined them.

Even Ava moved forward.

The frightened students gathered behind them.

Suna looked at all of them.

They were different shapes.

Different species.

Different abilities.

But they were standing together.

The Elder stared at the group.

Then he lowered his hand.

“Very well.”

His armor activated.

“Let’s see what the second stage has created.”

The lights went out.

And in the darkness, something enormous awakened beneath Hawthorne Academy.

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter Eight — Beneath the Academy

The lights went out.

For three seconds, nobody moved.

Then the floor shook.

Suna grabbed the nearest railing as a deep vibration rolled beneath her feet.

BOOM.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

Somewhere below them, metal groaned.

“What was that?” Ava whispered.

Nobody answered.

A second tremor struck.

BOOM.

This time, the entire laboratory moved.

The armored Elders staggered.

Max looked toward the floor.

“That came from underneath us.”

Megan’s wings tightened against her back.

“Hawthorne Academy doesn’t have anything underneath it.”

Alex laughed nervously from inside the chamber.

“It does now.”

Megan turned toward him.

“Alex, what does that mean?”

The emergency lights flickered on.

Alex pointed toward the floor.

“Project Nine wasn’t just about studying the Change.”

He swallowed.

“It was built underneath the school.”

Max’s face hardened.

“How far underneath?”

Alex looked at the Elder.

“Ask him.”

Everyone turned.

The feathered Elder remained silent.

Megan stepped toward him.

“You knew.”

“We all knew.”

“You knew there was something under the school?”

The Elder’s eyes moved toward the floor.

“We knew there was something sleeping.”

Another vibration shook the room.

Suna felt it inside her chest.

Not just the floor.

Something was calling to her.

She closed her eyes.

For a moment, she could hear everything.

The alarms.

The machines.

The breathing of everyone around her.

And beneath all of it—

A heartbeat.

Slow.

Enormous.

Boom.

Suna opened her eyes.

“There’s something alive down there.”

Alex stared at her.

“You can hear it?”

Suna nodded.

The Elder looked surprised.

“That’s impossible.”

Suna stared back.

“Apparently not.”

Max moved toward the emergency door.

“We need to get everyone out.”

The Elder raised his arm.

“No.”

Megan stepped in front of him.

“You’re not stopping us.”

“I’m not trying to.”

He pointed toward the ceiling.

“The exits are already sealed.”

Max looked upward.

“What?”

A metallic sound echoed through the laboratory.

CLANG.

Heavy doors dropped over every exit.

The students panicked.

“We’re trapped!”

“Everybody stay together!” Max shouted.

Megan spread her wings.

“We’re getting out.”

Alex suddenly shouted from the chamber.

“Wait!”

Everyone looked at him.

“Don’t fight the doors.”

Max frowned.

“Why?”

“Because they’re not keeping you in.”

Alex looked toward the floor.

“They’re keeping something else in.”

Silence.

Then—

BOOM.

A crack appeared across the laboratory floor.

Suna stepped backward.

The crack widened.

The machines began shutting down one by one.

Screens went black.

The countdown disappeared.

Then a new message appeared.

PROJECT NINE — PRIMARY SUBJECT AWAKENING

Suna stared at the words.

“Primary subject?”

Alex looked terrified.

“The first nine weren’t the experiment.”

Max’s voice was quiet.

“Then what were they?”

Alex looked at Suna.

“Markers.”

The floor exploded upward.

Everyone screamed.

A massive metal structure pushed through the concrete.

It looked ancient.

Not like a machine.

Not exactly.

It was covered in strange patterns that seemed to move beneath its surface.

The Elders stepped backward.

Even they looked afraid.

Megan stared at it.

“What is that?”

The feathered Elder finally answered.

“We don’t know.”

Suna felt the strange sensation again.

The thing beneath the school was calling her.

She took one step forward.

“Suna!” Max shouted.

She stopped.

“I’m okay.”

Her quills were standing straight up.

Every one of them.

Alex pressed his hands against the glass.

“Suna, listen to me.”

She looked at him.

“Don’t touch it.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t know what it’ll do.”

Suna stared at the enormous structure.

“What if it knows?”

Alex frowned.

“What?”

“What if it knows what I am?”

Nobody spoke.

Then the structure opened.

A bright light filled the laboratory.

Suna raised her arms to shield her eyes.

Inside the machine was a single symbol.

Nine circles surrounding one larger circle.

The same symbol appeared on the screens.

Then on the walls.

Then across the armor of the Elders.

Max stared.

“You’ve seen that before.”

The feathered Elder slowly nodded.

“Everywhere.”

“Where?”

The Elder looked at Suna.

“On the earliest records.”

Suna’s voice trembled.

“What records?”

The Elder didn’t answer.

Alex did.

“Records that were never supposed to exist.”

The machine suddenly projected an image into the air.

A forest.

Then a city.

Then a laboratory.

Then nine children.

Suna stared at the image.

They were young.

Human.

Normal-looking.

At first.

Then the image changed.

One child developed fur.

Another grew wings.

Another developed scales.

Another began growing quills.

Suna’s breath caught.

“That’s me.”

Alex nodded.

“Yes.”

“But I’m older there.”

“You were.”

Suna looked at him.

“What does that mean?”

Alex’s face went pale.

“It means the Change didn’t happen overnight.”

The image shifted again.

The nine children stood together.

Behind them was a symbol.

The same nine circles.

Then the recording ended.

The laboratory fell silent.

Max stared at Suna.

“You were part of this before you even knew it.”

Suna shook her head.

“No.”

Her voice was barely audible.

“I would’ve remembered.”

Alex looked at her.

“Maybe you were never supposed to.”

A loud crack echoed through the chamber.

The machine began opening wider.

Something moved inside.

Megan stepped forward.

“Everybody back.”

The students moved behind her.

Suna remained where she was.

She could hear the heartbeat again.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Then a voice entered her mind.

Not through the speakers.

Not through the machines.

Inside her head.

Suna.

She froze.

“Did anyone else hear that?”

Max shook his head.

“Hear what?”

The voice came again.

Suna.

She looked toward the machine.

“What do you want?”

The others stared at her.

Megan whispered:

“Who are you talking to?”

Suna didn’t answer.

The machine opened completely.

Inside was darkness.

Then two enormous eyes opened.

Suna stepped backward.

The creature beneath Hawthorne Academy slowly raised its head.

It wasn’t human.

It wasn’t any animal Suna had ever seen.

It looked like something built from pieces of countless species.

Fur.

Feathers.

Scales.

Quills.

Wings.

Claws.

But its eyes were intelligent.

And they were looking directly at Suna.

The creature spoke.

Not aloud.

Inside her mind.

You came back.

Suna’s heart stopped.

“I’ve never been here.”

The creature tilted its enormous head.

You have.

The laboratory shook violently.

Max grabbed Suna’s arm.

“We’re leaving.”

Suna looked at the creature one last time.

It whispered inside her mind.

The first nine are awake.

Then the lights exploded.

Darkness swallowed the laboratory.

And beneath Hawthorne Academy, something ancient began to rise.

Chapter Nine — The Choice

The countdown stopped.

06:00:00

For a moment, nobody moved.

Megan stared at the red numbers above the chamber.

Alex looked at her through the glass.

Then every light in the underground facility went out.

“Alex?”

Megan pressed both hands against the glass.

“Alex!”

Emergency lights flickered on.

The machines surrounding the chamber began to hum.

Alex’s expression changed.

“Megan, get away from the door.”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

She stepped backward.

A deep mechanical sound rolled through the room.

Somewhere beneath their feet, something enormous had started moving.

Megan looked toward the others.

“What did you activate?”

Alex shook his head.

“I didn’t.”

The chamber opened.

Steam spilled across the floor.

Alex stumbled forward, catching himself against the side of the machine.

Megan rushed toward him.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Alex looked down at his hands.

For a second, his fingers seemed almost transparent beneath the emergency lights.

Then they returned to normal.

Megan noticed.

“What was that?”

Alex didn’t answer.

“Alex.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“You’ve been missing for three days. I find you trapped inside some underground laboratory, there’s a countdown on the wall, and now your hand is disappearing.”

She pointed at him.

“You’re going to tell me what’s happening.”

Alex looked toward the dark hallway behind her.

“Not here.”

A metallic crash echoed through the facility.

Everyone froze.

Something was coming.

Megan lowered her voice.

“What was that?”

Alex swallowed.

“The reason I was brought here.”

Another crash.

Closer.

Megan spread her wings slightly.

“Then we should probably leave.”

Alex grabbed her arm.

“There’s something you need to know.”

“What?”

“The Change wasn’t random.”

Megan stared at him.

“What are you talking about?”

Alex looked at the machines.

“They knew it was coming.”

Megan’s face went pale.

“Who?”

Alex didn’t answer.

Instead, he pointed toward a monitor that had suddenly turned back on.

A file appeared on the screen.

PROJECT NINE

Beneath it were hundreds of names.

Megan stepped closer.

Her eyes moved down the list.

Suna.

Max.

Alex.

Her own name.

Megan stopped breathing.

“No.”

Alex looked at her.

“They didn’t just predict the Change.”

He pointed at the list.

“They were watching us before it happened.”

Megan’s eyes filled with anger.

“How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long, Alex?”

“I don’t know!”

The lights flickered again.

Then the screen changed.

A single sentence appeared.

SUBJECTS ARE NOW AWARE. BEGIN PHASE TWO.

Megan stared at the words.

“What is Phase Two?”

Alex looked toward the hallway.

“I think we’re about to find out.”

A door at the far end of the room slowly opened.

A figure stepped into the emergency light.

Megan raised her fists.

The figure didn’t attack.

Instead, it removed a hood.

Max.

Megan’s eyes widened.

“Max?”

Max looked exhausted.

His usually neat clothes were torn, and his long opossum tail was covered in dust.

Behind him stood Suna.

She looked frightened.

“Megan,” Max said.

She lowered her fists.

“What are you doing here?”

Max looked at Alex.

“We came looking for you.”

Suna stepped forward.

“We found the entrance underneath the old science building.”

Megan stared at her.

“You came down here?”

Suna nodded.

“We couldn’t leave you.”

For once, Megan didn’t have an answer.

Then a siren began screaming.

Red lights flashed across the walls.

Alex looked at the monitor.

The words had changed again.

PHASE TWO: ACTIVATED.

Max’s face hardened.

“What does that mean?”

Alex shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

A loudspeaker crackled overhead.

Then a calm voice filled the room.

“Good evening, subjects.”

Everyone looked up.

The voice continued.

“You have successfully located the facility.”

Megan stepped forward.

“Who are you?”

A pause.

Then:

“The person who has been waiting for you.”

The doors slammed shut.

Suna jumped.

Max grabbed the nearest handle.

“Locked.”

Megan looked at Alex.

“What now?”

Alex stared at the speaker.

For the first time since Megan had found him, he looked genuinely afraid.

“We’re not the ones who found the facility.”

He pointed toward the ceiling.

“They wanted us to find it.”

The room went silent.

Then every screen turned on at once.

Hundreds of images appeared.

Hybrids.

Children.

Teenagers.

People from Hawthorne Academy.

People Megan had never seen before.

And at the center of the largest screen was a photograph of Suna.

Suna stared at it.

“Why do they have my picture?”

Nobody answered.

The voice returned.

“Subject Nine has arrived.”

Megan slowly turned toward Suna.

Suna looked terrified.

“What does that mean?”

The screens went black.

A final message appeared.

THE FIRST NINE WERE NEVER THE END.

Then the entire facility shook.

Something beneath them awakened.

And somewhere far below the school, a door began to open.

Chapter Ten — Beneath the School

The floor shook again.

Suna grabbed the nearest railing.

“What is happening?”

Nobody answered.

Another tremor rolled through the underground facility, rattling the pipes in the ceiling.

Max pulled Suna away from the machines.

“Stay close to me.”

Megan was already moving toward the sealed doors.

“We need to get out.”

Alex shook his head.

“Those doors won’t open.”

“Then we’ll make them open.”

Megan spread her wings.

Alex caught her shoulder.

“Wait.”

She turned.

“What?”

“Look.”

He pointed at the wall.

A thin line of blue light had appeared between the metal panels.

It formed a path leading deeper into the facility.

Suna stared at it.

“That wasn’t there before.”

“No,” Alex said.

“It wasn’t.”

The blue line moved.

Slowly.

Like an arrow.

It pointed toward a door at the opposite end of the room.

Max approached it carefully.

There was no handle.

No keypad.

Nothing.

Then Suna noticed something.

“There’s writing.”

Everyone gathered around.

Tiny letters were engraved into the metal.

NINE ENTERED.

Beneath it:

ONE REMAINS.

Suna stepped backward.

“One remains what?”

Megan’s expression hardened.

“I don’t like this.”

Max looked at Alex.

“You know what this means.”

Alex hesitated.

“I have a theory.”

“Tell us.”

“The First Nine weren’t just the first people to change.”

Suna looked at him.

“What were they?”

Alex pointed at the door.

“They were a test.”

The door suddenly opened.

Darkness waited on the other side.

Megan looked at Max.

“Any chance we turn around?”

Max shook his head.

“No.”

“Great.”

They entered.

The hallway was much older than the laboratory.

The walls were made of concrete instead of metal.

Old pipes ran along the ceiling.

Suna could hear water dripping somewhere in the darkness.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Their footsteps echoed.

After several minutes, the hallway opened into a huge underground chamber.

Suna stopped.

“Oh.”

The room was enormous.

Rows of glass chambers filled the darkness.

Some were empty.

Others contained strange equipment.

Max walked toward the nearest one.

He wiped dust from the glass.

There was a name printed underneath.

SUBJECT ONE.

Megan looked at the next.

SUBJECT TWO.

Then another.

SUBJECT THREE.

Suna’s heart began pounding.

They walked past them.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Then they reached the final chamber.

SUBJECT NINE.

Suna stared at it.

Her name was written underneath.

She stepped backward.

“No.”

Max moved beside her.

“Suna…”

“No.”

She shook her head.

“I’ve never been here.”

Alex walked toward the chamber.

“You may not remember.”

Suna looked at him.

“What does that mean?”

Before Alex could answer, the chamber came alive.

Lights flickered on inside.

A recording began playing.

A woman appeared on a small monitor.

She wore a white laboratory coat.

“Project Nine began eleven years ago.”

Suna stared at the screen.

The woman continued.

“We believed the human body could adapt to animal genetics.”

Megan whispered:

“Eleven years…”

The recording continued.

“The first eight subjects demonstrated unstable changes.”

Images flashed across the screen.

The recording skipped ahead.

“Subject Nine was different.”

Suna couldn’t look away.

“Subject Nine showed complete genetic integration.”

Max’s eyes widened.

“What?”

The woman smiled faintly.

“Subject Nine was not transformed.”

The recording paused.

“She was designed.”

Silence.

Suna’s face went pale.

Megan immediately stepped between Suna and the screen.

“That’s impossible.”

Alex looked at the monitor.

“No.”

He sounded almost certain.

“It’s not.”

The recording continued.

“Subject Nine will eventually activate the remaining subjects.”

Suna looked at Alex.

“Activate them?”

The woman on the screen smiled.

“She is the key.”

The recording ended.

The chamber went dark.

Then something behind them clicked.

Max turned.

A massive metal door was opening.

Beyond it was another corridor.

But this time, they could hear voices.

Hundreds of voices.

Suna stepped closer.

“Who’s in there?”

Megan raised her hand.

“Don’t.”

The voices grew louder.

Then one voice separated from the others.

A familiar voice.

Max froze.

“No.”

Megan looked at him.

“What?”

Max stared into the darkness.

“That’s my father’s voice.”

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor.

Then another.

Then another.

Dozens of people emerged from the shadows.

They weren’t scientists.

They weren’t guards.

They were hybrids.

Young hybrids.

Older hybrids.

Some looked frightened.

Others looked angry.

And every one of them was staring at Suna.

The first hybrid stepped forward.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

Suna swallowed.

“Why?”

The hybrid looked at her.

“Because you’re the one who can change everything.”

The lights suddenly came on.

Megan looked around the chamber.

There were hundreds of hybrids.

And behind them stood a massive metal door marked with one final warning:

DO NOT OPEN UNTIL ALL NINE HAVE ARRIVED.

Max whispered:

“All nine.”

Alex looked at Suna.

“We need to find the others.”

Suna looked at the enormous crowd surrounding them.

“Before who does?”

A voice came from somewhere above.

“Before I do.”

Everyone looked up.

A shadow moved behind the glass ceiling.

Then the facility went completely dark.

Chapter Eleven — The Hidden Nine

Darkness swallowed the chamber.

Suna couldn’t see Max.

She couldn’t see Megan.

She couldn’t even see her own hands.

Then—

CLICK.

Emergency lights flickered on.

Megan stood directly in front of her.

“Everyone stay together!”

The hundreds of hybrids began shouting.

“What’s happening?”

“Who was that?”

“Where’s the exit?”

“Stay calm!”

Max climbed onto a metal platform.

“Everybody listen!”

The noise slowly faded.

“We don’t know who controls this facility,” Max said, “but we’re not going to let them control us.”

A few hybrids nodded.

Others looked uncertain.

Megan stepped forward.

“We need to find the other members of the First Nine.”

A young fox hybrid raised her hand.

“Why?”

Megan pointed toward Suna.

“Because apparently she’s the key.”

Suna frowned.

“I don’t even know what that means.”

A voice answered from the crowd.

“I do.”

Everyone turned.

An older-looking hybrid stepped forward.

He had dark feathers covering his arms and shoulders.

“My name is Corbin.”

Alex stared at him.

“You were here.”

Corbin nodded.

“I was Subject Four.”

Suna’s eyes widened.

“You’re one of the Nine?”

“One of the survivors.”

Megan stepped closer.

“Where are the others?”

Corbin looked around the chamber.

“Some escaped.”

“Some?”

“Some didn’t.”

The room became quiet.

Corbin continued.

“The scientists discovered that the changes weren’t identical. Each subject developed different abilities.”

Max looked at Suna.

“And her?”

Corbin’s expression became serious.

“That’s what they were afraid of.”

Suna felt a chill.

“What can I do?”

Corbin shook his head.

“We don’t know.”

“Then why are you calling me the key?”

“Because every time the facility activates, your genetic signature appears.”

Alex looked at the equipment.

“That explains the countdown.”

Megan frowned.

“What countdown?”

Alex pointed toward a monitor.

The timer had returned.

05:58:43

Suna stared at it.

“What happens when it reaches zero?”

Corbin looked terrified.

“We find out where the other eight are.”

Max stepped toward the screen.

“Can you stop it?”

Corbin shook his head.

“No.”

Megan looked around.

“Then we need another plan.”

A loudspeaker crackled.

Everyone froze.

The same calm voice from earlier filled the chamber.

“Excellent.”

Megan clenched her fists.

“Show yourself.”

A laugh echoed through the speakers.

“You have gathered exactly as predicted.”

Max shouted:

“Who are you?”

“My name is Dr. Vale.”

Alex went completely still.

Megan noticed.

“You know him.”

Alex nodded.

“He’s the director of Project Nine.”

Dr. Vale continued.

“And now that Subject Nine has awakened, the final stage can begin.”

Suna stepped toward the speaker.

“Why me?”

There was a long pause.

“Because you were the only one who survived the beginning.”

Suna shook her head.

“I don’t remember any of this.”

“You weren’t supposed to.”

The screens around the chamber suddenly turned on.

A video appeared.

A much younger Suna was sitting inside a laboratory.

She looked frightened.

Scientists stood around her.

Megan stared at the screen.

Suna couldn’t breathe.

“No…”

The video showed a young Max standing outside the same laboratory.

Then Alex.

Then Megan.

All three appeared in separate recordings.

They had been there.

Years before they ever met.

Max stared at his younger self.

“Why don’t I remember?”

Dr. Vale answered through the speakers.

“Because we erased it.”

Megan looked furious.

“You erased our memories?”

“Only the memories connected to Project Nine.”

Alex stepped forward.

“Why?”

“Because the experiment failed.”

Suna looked at the screen.

“Then why am I still alive?”

Dr. Vale’s voice became quieter.

“Because you weren’t the experiment.”

The screen changed.

A diagram appeared.

Nine circles surrounded one larger circle.

Suna’s name appeared in the center.

SUBJECT ZERO

She stared at it.

“Zero?”

Corbin whispered:

“They lied to us.”

Dr. Vale laughed softly.

“Subject Nine was only the name we gave her.”

Suna looked at Alex.

“What am I?”

The lights went out again.

A single red light appeared above the enormous door.

Then the door began opening.

Slowly.

Beyond it was a staircase leading even deeper underground.

Dr. Vale spoke one final time.

“Come downstairs, Subject Zero.”

Suna stared into the darkness.

Megan moved beside her.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Suna looked at the staircase.

Then at Max.

Then Alex.

Finally, she looked at the hundreds of hybrids watching her.

She took a breath.

“Yes.”

Megan raised an eyebrow.

“Yes what?”

Suna stepped toward the stairs.

“If they know something about me…”

She looked into the darkness.

“I’m going to find out.”

Max followed.

Megan sighed.

“Of course you are.”

Alex joined them.

Behind them, the other hybrids began moving too.

Together, they descended.

And far below the school, something began to wake up.